

## Converging Visions

Review of

*Meatyard/Merton – Merton/Meatyard: Photographing Thomas Merton*

Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014

42 pages / \$19.95 paper

Reviewed by **Marilyn Sunderman, RSM**

This gem of a book is a living testimony to the friendship of Thomas Merton and Ralph Eugene Meatyard. The text includes a Foreword by Stephen Reily, a sampling of the photographs that Meatyard took of Merton, a small number of Merton's calligraphies, a reflection on them by Roger Lipsey, and an essay by Chris Meatyard, Gene's son. Interspersed in the text are quotations from correspondence between Meatyard and Merton and entries from journals that Merton kept during his two-year relationship with Gene.

In the Foreword of the book, Reily notes that serious and impassioned conversation, the exchange of letters and mutual commitment to the Zen art of photography characterized Merton's and Meatyard's friendship. Reily describes Gene's photos of Merton as "portraits of observation as a kind of love" and notes that the eight abstract drawings included in the text are ones that Gene purchased from Merton. These calligraphies were exhibited at Eyeglasses of Kentucky, optician Gene's shop in Lexington.

In the text, Dr. Lipsey's brief essay on Merton's calligraphies includes comments on two of the drawings found in the book. Of note is the fact that, in his previously published *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*, Lipsey records that, in the quietude of his hermitage, Merton created hundreds of calligraphies. Lipsey describes Merton's art studio there as consisting of brush, India ink, a work-table, paper, mailing envelopes and materials such as grass stems that he gathered from outside his dwelling place. Merton referred to his calligraphies as "footprints *divested of ego*."<sup>1</sup> Because he wanted his abstract drawings to speak on their own, Merton seldom gave them titles. He commented: "Each time one sees them is the first time."<sup>2</sup> In the text, one finds in Merton's drawings multiple examples of dark/light contrast, a myriad of pointillistic-like dots, thick and thin black and greyish colored rings, and the use of the edges of envelopes. In their stark simplicity, these calligraphies are magnets that mesmerize their viewer.

Gene's photographs of Merton in the text represent a small portion of the corpus of his artistry that has been exhibited alongside that of such renowned photographers as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and Minor White. In his Merton photos, Gene employs techniques characteristic of his work in general, such as staging and multiple exposures of his subject(s), the inclusion of backgrounds of wooded landscapes and abandoned or dilapidated buildings, the use of props, and the contrast of

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light and shadow. Gene's photos of Merton include views of him as a Trappist monk, farmer, poet, bongo player and one who enjoys a picnic with friends.

Some of Gene's photos in the book include: poets Wendell Berry, Denise Levertov and Merton gather around an old wheelbarrow near Merton's hermitage (plate 2); against the backdrop of a brick-veneered old building with wooden slats showing through, Merton appears in his Trappist attire, his scapular waving in the breeze (plate 6); positioned in front of a dilapidated farm building, Merton and Guy Davenport peer intently into a rain barrel (plate 11); dressed as a farmer in straw hat and jeans, Merton holds a thyrus with an ear of corn in the middle prong, which identifies the bearer as one who enjoys corn whiskey! (plate 15); in the final photo that Gene took of Merton, the monk smiles broadly as he holds the camera that will accompany him on his journey to the East (plate 17); Merton is captured in a pensive moment during a summer picnic with friends somewhere on the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani (plate 20); accompanying a jazz record, an ecstatic, joy-filled Merton plays the bongos (plate 21); dressed in casual attire and evidently having shared a lunch of Gethsemani cheese, bread and fruitcake with friends, Merton sits behind his pine-top work-table in his hermitage (plate 29). Gene's photos offer a glimpse into Merton's multi-faceted personality and captures moments in Merton's all-too-brief life.

Excerpts from Merton's and Gene's correspondence and selections from journals Merton kept during the years of the two men's friendship are interspersed on pages opposite the photos and calligraphies in the text. While these excerpts provide a context for and add flavor to the photos and calligraphies, regrettably, for the most part citation of their sources is missing in the book.

Also included in the text is a substantive essay entitled "Zen Camera" by Gene's son Chris, in which he describes his father and Merton as brothers. Chris notes that both men were keenly interested in early Negro jazz, contemporary poetry and Zen, and that photography provided each of them with a way to experience the Zen art of seeing reality directly. In his essay, Chris also adds that both Merton and Gene believed that all that exists is "an extended part of God."

Gene's photos and Merton's abstract drawings seek to awaken the "primal consciousness hidden within"<sup>3</sup> the viewer. It is this reviewer's hope that all contemplative seekers who choose to spend time with the treasure that is *Meatyard/Merton – Merton/Meatyard* will enjoy such an awakening!

1. Thomas Merton, "Notes toward the Catherine Spalding College Exhibit," Notebook 14 (1964), quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (Boston, MA: New Seeds, 2006) 96.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 217.
3. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 90.